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Critics find Gates too bureaucratic

✓ By Bill Gertz
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Robert Gates, his confirmation as CIA director almost assured, demonstrated during two days of hearings last week that he is a consummate government bureaucrat comfortable with taking orders but lacking the stature of his predecessor, William Casey, according to intelligence officials.

Mr. Casey, who resigned Feb. 2 following surgery in December to remove a cancerous brain tumor, is widely regarded as having guided the agency to new levels of analytical and operational success during six years as CIA director.

In the process he never shunned controversy and developed the reputation of a free-wheeling intelligence chief with a shared commitment to President Reagan's conservative, anti-communist policies.

Mr. Gates, by contrast, represents the CIA's "new generation." He has spent his career at the agency analyzing data for estimates, assessments that are turned out for a secret community where, he told the Senate Intelligence Committee last week, "we measure computers by the acre."

Mr. Gates also served as an intelligence adviser to Republican and Democratic administrations, including a stint on the Carter administration National Security Council, where he worked with NSC adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and his intelligence deputy, David Aaron.

Former CIA Intelligence Director Ray Cline said the White House could have chosen a "political appointee" as CIA director to best protect the agency from its critics. But he described Mr. Gates as "a very capable officer," who is likely to gain the confidence of Congress.

"The real test is how firmly the president and the NSC support the CIA" in the wake of the Iran arms affair, he said.

Mr. Brzezinski in an interview praised Mr. Gates for his judgment and an appreciation for "the importance of conveying opportunity and warning to the president."

However, some intelligence professionals felt Mr. Gates was "tainted" politically by his close association with Carter administration intelligence officials, such as then-CIA Director Stansfield Turner and Mr. Aaron, who was notorious among conservatives for his opposition to covert activities.

Mr. Gates also worked with Frank Carlucci, a colleague of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and now the president's national security adviser.

Author John Ranelagh, in his 1986 book on the CIA, "The Agency," wrote that Mr. Gates approached intelligence "in terms of a bureaucrat seeking to identify with other important government bureaucracies."

"His imagination was reserved for methodology, not objectives and opportunities," Mr. Ranelagh said.

One administration intelligence official said Mr. Gates is not popular among Reagan political supporters and that his testimony before the committee "made him appear exactly the way he is — a bureaucrat."

By appearing to side with the committee at the expense of the intelligence professionals, Mr. Gates also isolated himself from many people in the U.S. intelligence community, the official said.

Echoing the sentiments of other intelligence professionals, the official said, "He sold out the agency in order to win confirmation."

For Mr. Gates, efforts to distance himself from the image of an overly ambitious career CIA official were not dispelled by his answers to questions about the Iran arms controversy.

Mr. Gates promised to "contemplate resignation" if asked by the president to keep secret a covert operation for more than several days. But he acknowledged to another lawmaker that the president can withhold details about covert operations for up to four or five months in rare cases.

The administration failed to notify Congress of the secret Iran deal for almost a year.

Mr. Gates drew chuckles when he said he would "hop in a car" to testify before the panel the moment he learned of any illegal intelligence activity.

He denied he "passed the buck" last October by telling Mr. Casey that a senior analyst had uncovered the possible diversion of Iran arms money to the Nicaraguan resistance. But, in doing so, he revealed that his suspicions about the diversion were passed along in bureaucratic fashion to "higher levels of authority."

Mr. Gates, near the end of his testimony, challenged news reports asserting he was loyal to faceless "bosses" and that he lacked creative leadership common among senior government officials.

"Sycophants can only rise to a certain level," Mr. Gates said. "There is an ample supply of them in this town, and they only go so far. The fact is those who rise to very senior levels of responsibility understand that the most dangerous thing to have around you is a yes man."

"And I believe, Mr. Casey, like some of the people that I have worked for — Dr. Brzezinski and others — felt that the candor with which I approached them was a valuable asset."

The committee plans to hold a closed-door session with Mr. Gates this week but is not expected to vote on the nomination until after a special White House panel on the Iran-Contra affair releases its final report this week.